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ABSTRACT

In 1928, 55 percent of elementary school principals were women. By 1973, only 20 percent were women. This paper examines research data for explanations of the decline of the percentage of women elementary school principals. Both incompetence and sex discrimination are rejected as explanations. Clues to the decline are traced to the decline of the feminist support system that occurred after women won the vote, to state laws for equal pay for equal work, and to the cult of efficiency that led to the bureaucratization of schools. The bureaucratization of schools entailed a redefinition of the elementary principal's role that clashed with the values and interests of most women, then and now. (Author/MLF)

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THE DECLINE IN FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS SINCE 1928:

RIDDLES AND CLUES

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THE DECLINE IN FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS SINCE 1928: RIDDLES AND CLUES

Today no one would describe the female principal as "a fixture in American schools." Yet a publication of the U.S. Bureau of Education (forerunner of HEW) little more than 50 years ago described the female principal in just those terms (Anon., 1926). At that time women comprised 55% of elementary school principals.

Since 1928 the percentage of women elementary principals has steadily declined, as can be seen from the table below (Johnson, 1971; NEA, 1973):

TABLE 1

Percent of Elementary School Principals Who Were Women

Year	Percent of Women Principals
1928	55
1948	41
1958	38
1968	22
1971	21
1973	20

The decline of women in elementary school principalships has been matched or surpassed by the decline of women in other positions of educational leadership. In 1910 (when school statistics did not yet distinguish between various administrative positions), more than half of all "supervising officers" were women. But by 1971 women constituted less than 16% of

all assistant principals, principals, and administrative assistants to the superintendent. They were represented in even smaller numbers in higher level district positions, constituting 2.9% of all assistant superintendents, 7.5% of all deputy and associate superintendents and, finally, only .06% of all superintendents (Estler, 1975).

Although elementary school principalships are not the only administrative positions that are held by fewer women each decade, the decline of women elementary principals is an especially intriguing phenonemon in view of certain recent statistics. In this paper we will examine the riddles implicit in those statistics. We will then go on to examine some historical clues that might begin to answer our riddles.

The Riddles

The first set of contemporary data that we will examine concerns the competence of female elementary school principals. We have more data about women's competence in elementary principalships than about their competence in any other position of educational leadership. Pottker and Fishel (1977) have reviewed nine studies and Meskin (1974) has reviewed four studies about the competence of female principals (as perceived by their supervisors, subordinates and themselves). The female principals are seen as no less competent (and generally more competent) than male principals in the following areas:

1. Instructional supervision,
2. General administration, and
3. Relations with students teachers, parents, and community.

These data do not support the hypothesis that the decline in the number of female elementary principals is based upon the failure of early female principals.

Our second set of data concerns the likelihood that women who aspire to elementary school principalships are thwarted by sex discrimination. Although a woman who aspires to an elementary school principalship may indeed encounter sex discrimination, she is apparently less likely to do so than a woman who aspires to any other line position in the hierarchy of educational administration (except perhaps a junior central office position).

Female teachers tend to have attitudes more favorable than male teachers' toward female supervisors (Pottker and Fishel, 1977: 293). This is significant in light of the fact that most elementary school teachers are women. Also, teachers of both sexes tend to have more favorable attitudes toward the idea of a female administrator if they have actually experienced working with one (Pottker and Fishel, 1977). So it seems likely that the women who once comprised 55% of elementary school principals built at least a temporary base of teacher support for a succeeding generation of female elementary school principals.

Although the majority of superintendents and school board members report that they do not have a policy (written or unwritten) excluding women from educational administration; 52% of superintendents believe that sex should be a determining criteria in the selection of superintendents (Pottker and Fishel, 1977). The percentage of superintendents and school

board members who report that sex is used as a determining criteria increases with the rank of the positions that they are asked to consider. Thus, the percentages of superintendents and school board members who agree that sex is a determining factor in the selection of an elementary principal is less than the percentage who agrees that sex is not a determining factor in the selection of any other position (Pottker and Fishel, 1977).

Like the majority of superintendents and school board members in the Pottker and Fishel study, a majority of teachers in a recent Minnesota survey (Mansergh, 1976) stated that sex should not be a determining factor in the selection of administrative personnel. However, they believed that a man would be selected in preference to a woman for the positions of superintendent, assistant superintendent, secondary principal, or assistant secondary principal. They were unsure only about the sex of the candidate who would be selected for the positions of elementary principal or assistant elementary principal.

Likewise, a recent survey of Oregon citizens (SEEL, 1977) indicates the public does not generally object to women in educational administration, but acceptance is greatest of women in elementary school principalships.

IF WOMEN WHO ASPIRE TO ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALSHIPS ENCOUNTER LESS SEX DISCRIMINATION THAN WOMEN WHO ASPIRE TO OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS AND IF WOMEN HAVE DEMONSTRATED THEIR COMPETENCE AS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS, WHY THEN HAS THE NUMBER OF FEMALE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS DECLINED SO DRAMATICALLY AND STEADILY SINCE 1928?

Do fewer women each year aspire to elementary school principalships? This question could be satisfactorily answered only with data about the trends of women's aspirations over the past 50 years, but no such data exist. Recent data about women's aspirations are conflicting and inconclusive. A 1971-72 survey of Minnesota teachers (Mansergh, 1976) suggests that "there is no difference in the aspirations of men and women teachers for school administrative positions," although men are more likely to be certified for administrative positions. Another survey (McMillan, 1975) suggests that between male and female prospective teachers who plan to work continuously, there is almost no difference in willingness to accept an assistant principalship. Although 15% more men than women in this study reported that they were willing to accept a principalship, the difference was not statistically significant. The aspirations reported by men were significantly higher than those reported by women only in regard to pursuing a doctorate or assuming a chief leadership position in an educational organization. In contrast, Pottker and Fishel (1977) conclude from their review of seven studies that in general "women do not aspire or prepare for administrative positions to the same extent as men." One study (Colombutos, 1962) found that only 2% of women teachers aspired to an administrative position, while almost half of the men teachers wanted to become administrators. However, beginning teachers of both sexes seem to be more eager than experienced teachers to enter administration (Colombutos, 1962; Mansergh, 1976). Yet another study indicates that 40.7% of female assistant principals, as opposed to 7.9% of male assistant principals, saw their jobs as a final occupational goal (Estler, 1975).

Despite conflicting and inadequate data, let us suppose for a moment that women's aspirations to elementary principalships have indeed declined since 1928. To what do we attribute this decline?

The Clues

A complete response to this last riddle would require an examination of the interacting social, economic, and political forces that lower women's aspirations in education and other fields. A complete response would also require an examination of how those forces changed from 1928 to 1973, both in society at large and in the public school system. The Depression, World War II, the baby boom, and the resurgence of feminism during the sixties are just a few of the historical events and trends that would have to be taken into account.

Such a thorough discussion is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. In fact, this paper will not be concerned at all with historical events and trends from 1928 to 1978. Instead, it will focus upon the cresting of the first wave of feminism and political/ideological trends affecting public schools from 1900 until 1928. Such phenomena, studied in isolation, certainly cannot fully explain the decline in women elementary principals since 1928. However, by examining the history of feminism and of public schools during the first three decades of this century, we can more clearly recognize that at the core of women's triumph in 1928 were the seeds of their subsequent decline.

1900-1930: The First Wave of Feminism. The nationwide feminist network of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was much more than a "suffrage movement." It attracted millions of women interested in many different issues, including a variety of educational reforms such as kindergartens, vocational education, and sometimes even sex education. According to Margaret Gribskov (1978):

> This network. . .came to be and remained for several decades, from the late 1890's until the early 1930's, an intensely powerful and complex organization. During those years, women reached higher proportions in school administration. . .than at any time before or since. Women also reached higher proportions in other professions during the same period, and the proportions of women college students and women Ph.D.'s peaked during that period. Perhaps the concurrence of all those events is coincidental, but that seems unlikely. What seems more likely is that this very large support system affected both society's attitudes toward women and women's opportunities to advance in professional careers, including school administration.

Among the most powerful organizations participating in the feminist support system were women's study clubs. Although a national federation of women's clubs emerged in 1890, the clubs were never united in support of any one issue or interest. However, they had clout because they were vocal and numerous (by 1916 Washington had 2,000 clubs). The biographies of prominent female educators from 1900 to 1928 strongly suggest that these women contributed to, and were sustained by, these feminist organizations (Gribskov, 1978).

Although nationwide women did not win the vote until 1920, by 1910 there were 24 states (mainly in the West and Midwest) where women could vote in school elections. In most of these states, women could also hold elective offices, such as county superintendencies.

The frustration of suffragettes at the federal level may have ironically helped feminists at the state level win unprecedented victories in education. From the late 1800's to 1920, the attention of feminists was focused upon school elections with an intensity that has rarely, if ever, been equalled.

By 1928, the 55% of elementary principals who were women were much more likely than contemporary female principals to look forward to advancement. Whereas 79.2% of contemporary female principals view the principalship as their final occupational goal (Estler, 1975), female principals in 1928 could realistically plan to run for county superintendent. In 1928, women constituted a fourth of county superintendents nationwide. From the county superintendency, women could hope to move on to the state superintendency. Before 1920 women had been elected state superintendents in eight states.

As the first—not the last--rung on a career ladder, the elementary principalship may have offered women much more challenge and allure than it does today. Opposition to women entering school administration did exist, especially outside the West; but women apparently believed that they were on the brink of overcoming all opposition.

With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, euphoria reigned. In 1927, George Count reported that the number of women elected to school boards had increased since 1920. He predicted that the number of women school board members would continue to rise until they outnumbered men.

History was not particularly kind to such hopes. According to Count's 1927 study, 11% of school board members were women; 45 years later, 12% of school board members were women and 40% of school boards in the U.S. still did not have any women members (Fishel and Pottker, 1974).

The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment turned out to be less than the conclusive victory that many feminists believed it to be at the time. Celebrating prematurely, the feminists allowed their formidable network to dissolve. The League of Women Voters replaced the women's study clubs and school elections no longer commanded the undivided energy of women who could finally vote in other elections.

Also, within 10 years after women won general suffrage, ten states passed laws providing equal pay for equal work (Tyack, 1974:65). School boards had previously paid women less than men. A 1905 NEA survey of 467 city school systems revealed that the average annual salary paid a female elementary principal was $970, while the average salary paid a male elementary principal was $1,542. One reason given for the discrepancy was the need "to take a stand for the restoration of the element of masculinity in schools" (Tyack, 1974:61). But although in 1905 male elementary teachers

earned a salary of $1,161 ($511 more than female elementary teachers), that same year men comprised only 2% of the teachers in elementary schools (Tyack, 1974: 61-62). But when actually confronted with a choice between a cheap female applicant and a more expensive bastion of masculinity, many school boards may have opted for cutting costs. It is probably no coincidence that the percentage of men teaching and serving as principals in elementary schools has steadily risen since the passage of state laws mandating equal pay for equal work.

1900-1930: The Bureaucratization of Schools. The cresting of the first wave of feminism paralleled the cresting of another U.S. movement, "the cult of efficiency" (Callahan, 1962). From 1900 to 1930, schools underwent a massive reorganization modeled after the businessman's ideal of efficiency plus economy. At the turn of the century, muck-raking journalists began a vehement and sustained attack on public schools for failing to follow the principles of "scientific management." Schools were accused of not processing students (commonly called "products") quickly or, above all, cheaply enough. Without tenure, clearly defined authority or professional status; educators were very vulnerable to this attack. They were also hard pressed to keep up with the rapid growth of public schools in number, size and complexity. From 1900 to 1928, compulsory education laws were enforced more consistently and public demand for secondary education increased dramatically. The public also pressed for an expanded curriculum, more extracurricular activities and an array of social

services. In the meantime, the transition continued from the rural one-room schoolhouse to the larger, but more crowded, urban school. Finally, the influx of immigrants placed new demands upon teachers and, despite the rhetoric of "efficiency," cost per pupil rose steadily (Spring, 1972; Tyack, 1974).

Most educational administrators, therefore, joined journalists and the public in looking to the apparently invincible "captains of industry" for leadership. During this period, school boards were increasingly dominated by businessmen whose experience represented only a small percentage of the population but whose ideology exemplified the new, popular faith in "scientific management" (Spring, 1972; Callahan, 1962). In 1916 Ellwood Cubberly wrote in his widely used textbook, Public School Administration, that the best school board members were "men who are successful in large business undertakings." Those who most definitely did not make good school board members were inexperienced young men, unsuccessful men, old men who have retired from business, politicians, saloon-keepers, uneducated or relatively ignorant men in minor business positions, and women. . ."

The "men successful in large business undertakings" saw schools as large business undertakings organized as though they were small cottage industries. So the businessmen worked hard to reorganize the schools to bureaucratize them, although the captains of industry and finance eschewed that word. As we shall see, this bureaucratization of public schools entailed a redefinition of the elementary principal's role that evidently clashed with the values and interests of most women, then and now.

According to Michael Katz (1968), bureaucratization of Boston schools in the late 19th century was accomplished through the following changes:

1) centralization of control and supervision
2) differentiation of function
3) qualification for office
4) rules defining desirable habit or behavior patterns of all members of such an organization; namely, objectivity, precision and consistency, and discretion

The remainder of this paper shall attempt to show how the bureauratization of schools nationwide was accomplished through the same process from 1900 to 1930.

First, school boards were reorganized in the interest of centralizing power and authority. According to Tyack (1964: 127), "until the 1890's, in most large cities the school board remained large, ward boards kept substantial powers, and the whole mode of lay management was diffuse, frequently self-contradictory and prone to conflict." This changed from 1893 to 1923, as the average number of central school board members per city dropped from 21.5 to seven. Also by 1923, neighborhood ward boards had all but disappeared and most central board members were elected at large. Centralization made control of the boards much easier for an elite of businessmen to win elections. Some cities even went further, replacing election of school board members with appointment. As one board member explained, "This is a time when prodigious efforts are being concerted to concentrate interests managed by many under a system whereby they can be controlled by one corporate authority" (Tyack, 1974; 162-63).

As ward boards representing different interest groups were replaced by "one corporate authority" (the centralized "board of directors"), the role of the superintendent also changed. In the late nineteenth century, the superintendent was an elected official with a very ambiguous role. The authority and responsibilities delegated to individual superintenderts by their local school boards varied enormously. But by 1930, the superintendent's role had been clarified. He (and I use the pronoun intentionally) was now "general manager," appointed by the board of directors. His power had increased considerably, since, as a speaker at a 1915 NEA convention put it, "no board of directors would dream of continually interfering with, over-ruling, and humiliating its general manager" (Callahan, 1962: 210).

"Differentiation of function" also occurred at this time. According to Robert and Helen Lynd, quoted in Tyack (1974: 185), at the turn of the century the superintendent was often "the only person in the system who did not teach, but by the 1920's there was between the teacher and the superintendent 'a whole galaxy of principals, assistant principals, supervisors of special subjects, directors of vocational education and home economics, deans, attendance officers and clerks,' who do no teaching but are concerned in one way or another with keeping the system going." By 1918, teaching and educational administration were established as clearly separate professions (Callahan, 1962: 219).

A third step toward bureaucratization is described by Katz as "qualification for office." David Tyack (1974: 185) describes how qualifications changed for teachers during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

> Together with rapidly expanding college and university departments and schools of education, professional associations helped to persuade state legislatures to pass laws requiring certificates for the various specializations. Replacing the earlier licenses based on examinations, the new certificates were based upon completion of professional training and legitimized specialists by level - kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, high school, and so on, and by function - principal, guidance counselor, school librarian, supervisor or teacher of vocational subjects, and so forth. In 1920, only two states had specialized credentials: by 1930, almost all states had elaborate certification laws.

At the turn of the century, even the leading colleges and universities offered hardly any specialized courses in educational administration. But by 1920, a variety of courses were offered. The number of graduate degrees conferred in education was soaring and separate departments of educational administration were emerging. A review of course catalogs, textbooks, and doctoral dissertations from the time reveals that the new graduate programs in educational administration strongly emphasized business and finance (Callahan, 1962: 196-204).

The last step toward bureaucratization mentioned by Katz is "the establishment of rules defining desirable habits or behavior patterns of all members of such an organization, namely, objectivity, precision and consistency, and discretion." The "cult of efficiency" dictated that everyone (administrators, students, teachers, janitors) should be evaluated according to standardized, objective standards of efficiency (Callahan, 1962: 100-110). But from 1910 on, special attention was paid to rating the efficiency of

teachers. After surveying public schools in 25 U.S. cities, Upton Sinclair concluded in 1924 that teachers were often evaluated with a conservative bias, especially after the outbreak of World War I. As one teacher told Sinclair, "there are graveyards of radical teachers all over this country" (Callahan, 1962: 136).

The Female Elementary Principal: 1928 and After

How did these changes affect the female elementary principal in 1928? We can infer from a recent study of contemporary female principals (Gross and Trask, 1976) that five decades ago the female elementary principal may have felt some regrets about becoming less of a teacher and more of an administrator. Even today, the profile of the female principal is mildly reminescent of the old "head teacher" role. Sixty-five percent of contemporary female principals report that they decided by their senior year of high school that they wanted to become teachers, whereas only 27% of male principals made a commitment to teaching so early. Eighty-five percent of women reported that teaching was their first-choice occupation, whereas 46% of men reported that teaching was their first choice. Furthermore, only 22% of the female principals reported not being highly motivated to enter teaching, as opposed to 59% of male principals. Reviews of several studies by both Joan Meskin (1974) and Andrew Fishel and Janice Pottker (1975) indicate that women tend to acquire more experience than men before becoming principals. Even after they become principals, they are more concerned than men with instuctional supervision. It is noteworthy

that today the majority of public alternative school directors are women (Pruitt, 1976). The usual role of the alternative school director is remarkably similar to that of the old-time "head teacher." It is also noteworthy that teachers of both sexes who do not aspire to administration most often explain that they "prefer teaching and the day-to-day contact with students" (Mansergh, 1976).

In addition to missing the opportunity for occasional teaching, some female elementary principals in 1928 may have also recalled with nostalgia the leadership that they had exercised before their school districts included a high school. In such small elementary districts, the elementary principal was, in fact, the chief administrator. By 1928 the number of such districts was dwindling, although they were still more common than they are today (Gribskov, 1978). Also, as we have seen, by 1928 the school board and the superintendent had gained considerable control and authority. Because business and professional men dominated the school boards and because their ideology captivated the public, the corporate model prevailed. Increasingly, female principals were seen as low level "bosses" under "foreman" (assistant superintendents) who took orders directly from the "general manager" (the city superintendent).

Again, we can draw interesting inferences about responses of women principals back then from data about contemporary women principals. Reviews of several studies (Meskin, 1974; Fishel and Pottker, 1975) indicate that contemporary women principals have more democratic leadership styles than men. Contemporary women principals also enjoy administrative duties (e.g.

evaluating teachers or allocating the school budget) less than male principals, although the women apparently perform these duties as well, if not better, than the men (Fishel and Pottker, 1975; Gross and Trask, 1976). Similarly, school board members of both sexes report that women school board members are less concerned with business and financial matters than men (Pottker and Fishel, 1977: 542-43). From these data we can infer that by 1928 the impact of "the cult of efficiency" on schools may have diminished the allure of the elementary school principalship for many women.

Perhaps, too, by 1928 women were beginning to recognize that their opportunities for advancement were limited. Although women were still being elected state and county superintendents, very few women were advancing up their local hierarchies to the city superintendency (Gribskov, 1978). This curtailing of opportunities for advancement may have further diminished the allure of the elementary principalship for women. Today, 23% of female principals (as opposed to 37% of male principals) report that they initially pursued the principalship because they saw it as an opportunity for professional advancement (Gross and Trask, 1976).

The women who were already working as elementary school principals in 1928 may have felt some regrets about their changed and changing role, but most of them stayed anyway. Perhaps only when it came time for these early women administrators to retire, did they grasp the full import of the changes that had swept the country and the public schools from 1900 to 1928. Then it became clear that more of their successors were men than women.

For reasons already mentioned, the elementary principalship may have been less desirable to a new generation of women than it had been to the generation that peaked in 1928. Furthermore, those young women who did not aspire to the elementary school principalships faced several new obstacles. Highly specialized, separate training programs for both teachers and administrators made the transition for teaching to administration more difficult. In all graduate programs, but especially in programs of educational administration, the faculty and students were overwhelmingly male. For female role models, aspiring women could turn only to normal schools. (Again, we can infer much from Gross and Trask's study which shows that 50% of contemporary female principals, as opposed to 24% of male principals, received their undergraduate training from a state teachers college or normal school.) Young women who aspired to the elementary school principalships after 1928 were increasingly alone. They could not turn to a feminist network for support. If they were themselves feminists they may well have espoused other radical causes and so ended up in the "graveyards for radical teachers." Finally, they had lost even the dubious asset of being cheaper than men.

All of these factors were present, at least latently, in 1928 when women principals seemed on verge of becoming "fixtures in the elementary schools." That year, women celebrated an unprecedented triumph: at last they had not only the vote, but also a majority of their own sex in elementary principalships. The victory was ripe and sweet, but it was also barren. The only seeds it contained were the seeds of a gradual decline.

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